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# How Are You?



## Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

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by TAF  
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528 Publications

A GIFT OF DHAMMA—NOT FOR SALE

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## How are you?

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Whenever we see someone and greet them, the first thing we tend to ask is, “How are you doing?” When we run into someone we are close to, before saying anything else we smile and ask, “How are you?” “How’s it going?” “Are you doing well?” For most of us, the question, “How are you?” is a mechanical greeting, asked without any noteworthy intention. Some people may ask this with actual concern about the other’s well-being, but usually it is just used as a habitual greeting.

And when we are asked this question, we tend to answer, “I’m well” without any hesitation. Even if we have a health concern or are upset for one reason or another and are lacking peace of mind, we usually avoid bringing it up and just immediately reply, “I’m well.” We have to give an answer regardless of how we are feeling when this question comes up. If we didn’t answer, the other person might get the impression we are hiding some sort of serious personal problem or health issue. Whatever the case, when someone asks us how we’re doing, we can just reply that everything is all right. Then the greeting will be out of the way, and we can move on to whatever other topics we want to talk about.

Actually, it’s not really suitable to ask the question, “How are you?” The human life is not one that is characterized by being in great conditions. We weren’t born as humans to be in a state of perfect well-being. Our lives began with crying from the moment of birth. We start out in an unfavorable position because the body can’t be free from *dukkha*, and the ordinary person can’t be free from the *kilesā*. Starting from birth, misery, worry, and stress are part of the whole life, so this matter of being human is not so well at all.

People readily get old, fall ill, and die. As we grow old and become sick, the signs of aging and illness become obvious in our appearances. They can’t be hidden or kept secret. We shouldn’t pretend otherwise. It’s blatantly obvious. When we become old and sick, our lives aren’t so great. Getting around is difficult. We aren’t able to undertake the things that we used to. Eating and digestion become problematic. Nothing is optimal. However, when we consider aging and illness, we don’t have to become depressed or demoralized. It’s showing us clearly what it is to be human. It’s the thrust of Dhamma. The body’s nature of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā* is being directly displayed.

A human life has conditions that bring about dis-ease. We aren't in a state of comfort and luxury like the *devas*. We have to strive hard and put up with fatigue in order to make a living so that we can have food, clothing, and shelter. Not like *devas* who, because of past *kamma*, have lives of complete ease and are in a state of constant enjoyment. As for us, life leaves us rather rundown from always having to struggle and scurry about. A lot of time is required for us to even be able to have one meal. And the bigger our social circles are, the more time we will have to devote to them, too. Even though we may have a lot of tasks to tend to, our minds don't have to be chaotic as a result. We can view having many tasks as having abundant opportunities to act skillfully and perform *kusala*.

Another fact concerning the struggle of human life pertains to the duty to perform tasks for our children while sacrificing self-interest. It's not to say that being in a condition of dis-ease means we're sprawled out in bed, unable to function. It means we're not in a state of constant enjoyment like the *devas*. Many important responsibilities come along with having a human life and having duties toward our children. We sometimes have to give up the chance to perform certain acts of *kusala* because we are so preoccupied with taking care of our own essential needs as well as the needs of our children. Even with the resources of patience, goodwill, and compassion, it's easy to feel flustered while carrying out these duties. Imagine if we went ahead and tried doing these tasks without the help of these resources. We would find ourselves terribly overwhelmed and unhappy. Let's imagine a baby who started crying at midnight when we were sound asleep, and we lacked patience, goodwill, and compassion toward the child. The baby may fuss and cry the whole night and we wouldn't know why. Even if we were to ask what was wrong, a baby couldn't answer us. If we had to deal with this situation without the help of compassion, patience, and goodwill, how miserable it would be! This is just one example. If we look at human life as a whole and consider all the tasks that we have to deal with, we cannot point out a time in which we are in a perfect state of ease and enjoyment. And so, although we may ask one another how we're doing, we are never truly well.



## Is it still useful?

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Being able to perform kusala is the very essence of a human life. No matter what activities we involve ourselves in, they should result in kusala. Having been born as humans, we should make the most of it and plant our victory flags, which can only be achieved by carrying out kusala. As the Buddha said, humans are superior to devas in three ways: (1) humans tend to be more determined when it comes to performing kusala; (2) humans have stronger *sati*; and (3) humans have a better opportunity to be able to train in the noble path.

1. Humans are born with two great adversaries—*dukkha* and *kilesā*. To achieve victory over these foes, we must relentlessly strive to perfect kusala. This is what raises our determination. It's similar to how a football team can become undaunted and spirited in response to having to face a fierce opponent. A human can be ardent enough in the practice to the point of becoming a Buddha—the highest, most excellent being. This steadfast pursuit of kusala is just the good side of being human, though. It's also possible to be resolute in regard to performing *akusala*, even to the extent of committing the five grave deeds.

2. When we are born into the human realm, the nail of *dukkha* that is coupled with *kilesā* strikes us deep enough that we cry out, “waa-waa” as life is thrust upon us. We can't forget about aging, illness, and *dukkha* for very long because we see blatant evidence of them throughout our entire lives. They give us a sense of urgency to strive toward an escape from them as they push us along. Because devas don't experience these warning signs, their *sati* is not as strong. Aside from that, the tasks and matters humans have to tend to throughout life are endless. To avoid being overwhelmed with all of our affairs and to put the strength of Dhamma into everything we do, we need to put our undivided focus onto each task, and, in doing so, our *sati* is multiplied.

3. The human plane is a special realm for those who are inclined to walk on the noble path as monks in order to reach the summit of the practice. This opportunity does not exist in the other planes of existence. And if we choose to practice the threefold training of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* as lay people, the human plane is the only place where this can be



practiced adequately. The more we can see things with wisdom, the more the feeling of *saṃvega* will be induced in us. We'll see the dukkha related to the body more clearly. We'll be more sensitive to the force of the eight vicissitudes. That's why *bodhisattas* fulfill their *pāramī* in the human realm much more often than in the celestial realms.

Devas simply live in luxury and comfort; the human life is very different. As humans, it's essential that we amass as much genuine kusala as we can. We must put our lives to use in the right way in order for kusala to materialize. Everything we do to take care of our bodies should be so that they can continue to survive and be put to proper use, in the same way that oil and gas must be put into a car in order to drive it to some destination. Because we are in an era in which the human life span has become shortened so that it isn't even equivalent to one day of a deva's life, we must apply sati to control what little time we do have so that we can use our lives to develop kusala at the quickest rate.

When we see one another, we should ask, "Is it useful?" "You can still use your body, right?" Because with a human life, it's especially important to use our bodies productively so that we can gain kusala before it's too late. This is the question worth asking. That's why when I see someone, it's become a habit for me to ask, "Is the body still available to use?" People who are not accustomed to being asked this type of question become dumbfounded when I ask them this. After explaining it, they laugh with understanding and reply accordingly, "It's still useful, venerable sir."

When people see me and ask how I'm doing, I will answer, "I can still use it." When my answer doesn't seem to correspond to their question, they think I'm hard of hearing and repeat the question more loudly, asking "How are you?" two or three more times. I repeat, "It is still useful, I can still ask it to do things for me," and then I have to explain what I mean so they can understand.

When I see people who are familiar to me—those who are Dhamma practitioners, and those who are from the monastic community—I usually greet them in this way. On the rare occasion when I receive dignitaries, strangers, and people who are not familiar with Dhamma, I just greet them in the normal way that others do for practicality's sake. More often than not, though, I ask, "Is the body still available to use?" and I reply, "It is still useful, I can still ask it to do things for me" when asked how I'm doing. In a human life, the one crucial thing that we need to tightly hold on to is kusala. Everything else is inconsequential. We always need to live our lives carefully so that we can hold on to the appropriate things.

## **Ask the devas how they're doing.**

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It's fine to ask devas the question, "How are you?" Devas are much more comfortable and enjoy more luxuries than humans. They are exceptionally well. The deva life span is very long. Although they get old, they don't show signs of aging. It is said that a male deva will remain as though he was 20 years old for his whole life, and a female deva will remain as though she was 16 years old, so they are all young men and women from the moment they appear in their realms. There aren't any deva grandfathers or grandmothers. It's also said that although the characteristic of anicca is present, it doesn't show in their physical forms. They avoid these troubles all life long as they dwell in a state of ease and enjoyment, so of course they are doing well. They say when a deva dies, a corpse isn't left behind.

What's more, they don't have to worry about their food. This, too, is based totally on their good kamma. They don't have to seek out and prepare what they eat. When the time arrives, they have their meal. However, because their bodies are extremely delicate, skipping just one meal can kill them as their stomachs are susceptible to burning up. There are some devas who die from skipping meals because they become so enthralled with other pleasures that they forget to eat. So, although life for devas seems wonderful because they are so comfortable, it still has its hazards. Another serious concern is that when they become intensely upset and angry, they can die from their fragile bodies not being able to bear the adverse effects of their emotions. So they are well, but at the same time, not so well.

As for clothing, they can live with only one outfit all life long. They never need new ones. Just as their bodies don't show signs of aging, their clothing doesn't show wear. Along with their perpetually young, beautiful bodies, their clothing is also always fresh and beautiful. Since there are no bodily impurities, their clothing remains as good as new and never needs to be washed. Their living arrangements are another thing they don't have to worry about. Their kamma is such that they have mansions for their entire lives. They get to live in them without needing to maintain or decorate them. They live charmed lives in the lap of luxury. Regarding health-related matters, there aren't any diseases or illnesses

that would require them to seek medical attention, so they don't need to worry about that either. For these reasons, they are doing really well.

In the celestial realms, although the sense objects that the devas experience are of the nature of *anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anattā*, they have the appearance of being of the nature of *nicca*, *sukha*, and *attā*. The devas are deceived by this—it's like they are watching a magic show. In the celestial realms, the thrust of aging and illness is weak. There is little to bring about a sense of *saṃvega* in them, while there is a lot that delays them from practicing Dhamma. One only practices Dhamma when one is compelled to.

The comforts and luxuries of the devas are enormously broad. They are at the summit of the sensuality of the five senses. Compared to their luxuries, the luxuries of humans are like tiny dewdrops on blades of grass; they easily evaporate and disappear. Compared to the luxuries of humans, those of devas are deeper than the water of the ocean. It's said that their sense pleasures are so broad that they could never use them all up or tire of them. That's why devas are unquestionably well. But that is just speaking of worldly luxuries. If we compare the luxuries of the Dhamma, humans excel.

The higher-level devas don't have any matters related to children that would cause stress and suffering, or require self-sacrifice, as they are spontaneously born beings, not needing to grow up and come of age. The guardian spirit of trees and the guardian deity of the earth, two of the Four Great Heavenly Kings, are lower-level devas who have to live in society in the human realm, and, like people, they start out young and gradually grow up. The higher-level devas are not like this, since they are at their mature age at once. Seeing that the matters of raising children don't exist, they are certainly delighting in their lives of ease.

In the celestial realms, everything is adequate. Wherever you look, everything seems to be in a permanent state of perfection, with no signs of *anicca*, unpleasantness, or anything that would evoke a feeling of *saṃvega*. As for the climate, it's neither hot nor cold. Life is perfect. That's why it's okay to ask devas how they are doing. Although they may be old in age, they are youthful, so if you addressed them as "Mr." or "Mrs." they probably wouldn't like it. I think they'd only like it if you use "brother" or "sister." "Brother deva, sister deva, how are you?"

They'd probably reply, "Oh, we're well! Very well! We're enjoying life! Everything is perfect! There are no worries whatsoever regarding food, clothing, and shelter, and we don't have to worry about getting around. We don't have to use cars, trains, or any sort of vehicles when we want to travel. We just fly there under our own power. Why don't you come to the celestial realms?" I think that's what they would say to us.

If we were to question them further and ask just how well they are doing, they'd probably answer, "We're doing well enough to forget about kusala." It's because there are very few things that are tinged with dukkha—very few things that are undesirable or that would make them uncomfortable and push them toward feelings of *saṃvega*. For us travelers of *saṃsāra*, we should safeguard kusala, as if it were an investment. If we forget about kusala, it's like throwing away our investment. If we lose our investment, we'll descend to the lower realms. If we get so comfortable that we forget about kusala, we'll lose our goodness and suffer greatly. The ramifications of this loss outweigh the enjoyment of living with ease and comfort many times over. When the period of enjoyment comes to an end, the headlong plunge downward must follow.

Even Sakka, the deva king, was liable to forget the Dhamma because there were too many sensual pleasures around him. If this can happen to a *sotāpanna* deva like Sakka, then someone who reaches the celestial realms with ordinary kusala, i.e., as a result of performing kusala as a mere *puthujjana*, will certainly forget the Dhamma due to the many sensual pleasures they will find there, and they will lose their kusala investment. When their life span reaches its end, they may fall directly down to the woeful realms, not even stopping in the human realm. We can compare this to a paper lantern that is lit so that it fills with heated air. If the thrust of the hot air is strong, the lantern will rise beautifully, and people will cheer it on, happy to give it their blessings—"Rise up, rise up."

Once it's high up in the sky though, there's nobody there to add more thrust to it, so its power is used up little by little until, finally, the fuel runs out. When there's no longer any fuel to burn, the paper ignites and plummets back down while burning up. It's beautiful while it's aloft, but not when it's falling down. It's inevitably burned up and destroyed, and nobody's there to welcome it back. Those who reach the celestial realms with ordinary kusala don't continue to make more kusala because they are extremely well off and their lives are too comfortable. When their fuel runs out, they will plummet down in an awful manner to the woeful realms. Their investment will be lost and they will collapse mightily. That's why those with great wisdom declare, "If you are an ordinary human ascending to the celestial realms, the losses are greater than the benefits; going to the celestial realms as a *sotāpanna*, you can rest assured." The celestial realms are places where you can be cheerful and amused, without worry or care, only if you're a *sotāpanna*. Ordinary humans, however, can't help excessively delighting in the pleasures and tend to fall hard to the woeful realms when their time there is up. If we reach the stage of *sakadāgāmi*, we will no longer delight in the celestial realms because sensual passion will have become scarce. As an *anāgāmi*, it would become a dull place.

## If you want to be well, go to the celestial realms.

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I call Myanmar itself the “human realm” because it is a place where we can profit immensely by developing kusala in daily life, as it’s a country where the *sāsana* and the Triple Gem of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the *Śaṅgha* are prominent. I refer to countries where people set their goals based on material prosperity rather than on Dhamma as “celestial realms.” The *sāsana* and Triple Gem are lacking in those places, and achieving financial goals rather than goals based on Dhamma won’t yield the same sort of benefits.

In foreign countries, where people don’t have the Dhamma leading them to the highest goal possible, they must work toward the goal of material prosperity. Material wealth, being plentiful there, is their main focus, so they try to earn as much of it as they can. People try their utmost to keep the true nature of things hidden so they can avoid the signs of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, and *asubha*. They’re mainly concerned with situating things in such a way so that they can live with maximum comfort rather than thinking about performing kusala.

People who leave Myanmar to live in other countries generally don’t do so in order to amass kusala. Most go to live with a higher level of comfort by improving their financial and material circumstances. When they become comfortable, they forget about performing kusala. But we can only withstand the unpleasantness that we encounter in life by being rich in acts of kusala. If kusala is lost in someone’s life, they will feel uncomfortable no matter what material possessions they might have. Some people become so distressed with their lives that they can no longer cope. Their actions become reckless and their life loses value. They go from living like they are in a deva realm, to living like they are in a hell realm. Some people periodically return to the true human realm that is Myanmar to become revitalized by performing kusala. The fact that the Triple Gem is fully present makes Myanmar an ideal place for performing kusala and they make sure their merit is thoroughly replenished before they return to their homes abroad.

The sense objects that we experience in the human realm aren’t substantial enough to cause us to get totally lost in our enjoyment of them; we don’t enjoy them to the extent that we become so careless that we can’t maintain sati and lose the ability to perform kusala. If we look at a sense object with sati, then it is nothing but a Dhamma sense object; there is no

sense object that is not applicable to the Dhamma. Unlike in the hell realms, there is no type of dukkha that is strong enough to make the Dhamma inaccessible here. All the dukkha that we experience is merely the nudge of Dhamma. So although we're never absolutely well in every respect, we have the advantage of the Dhamma, which is the heart of life. The human realm is the ideal place to develop in Dhamma, and that's why, for a Buddha-to-be, the pāramī are usually amassed in the human realm rather than in the celestial realms.

Kusala is the basis of the pāramī. In the human realm, and notably in Myanmar, we can develop kusala as much as we want to, and even more than is necessary. In order to fulfill our pāramī, we don't need to go to the heavenly celestial realms or to foreign countries that are emulations of the celestial realms. It's adequate right where we are. Wanting to be in either of those two types of celestial realms—the genuine ones or the emulations—is wishing to be well and in luxury. So if you want to be well, go to a celestial realm.

The point of being in the human realm is not to be well and live in idyllic comfort. We are here to try to maximize the purpose of life by extracting out as much kusala as we can from it. To that end, dukkha serves an important purpose for us by sounding the alarm and providing the push we need to develop kusala. All of our physical possessions are ingredients to make kusala. All of our activities are openings where kusala can come in. That's why if we are asked, "Are you well?" we can answer, "Oh, not so well. Not at all in a state of enjoyment like the devas. There is so much dukkha and so much work to be done, so much anxiety and worry." By saying we aren't well, we mean that we aren't in a state of comfort and enjoyment like the devas.

And if we are then asked, "How unwell are you?" we can answer, "Unwell enough to not dare forget about kusala." From this perspective, our state of dis-ease and being unwell is very precious. All the kusala we gain is a consequence of being driven toward it by our affliction. It's well worth it to miss out on bliss in order to gain kusala.

## **Bus commuters.**

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We can liken devas and humans to two types of commuters who ride buses in Yangon. Some commuters who have to travel a long distance go to the starting point of the route to board the bus. That way, they can be sure to get a seat and sit for the whole trip. Most commuters, though, will get on at a stop located at some point along the route. They find there aren't any places to stand comfortably, let alone to get a seat, especially during rush hour. Bus after bus that comes is like this. They can't just keep waiting for a bus that might have free seats to arrive in hopes of having an easier commute because they don't want to be late for work, so they cram in wherever they can and desperately hold on, dangling as the bus goes along, like they were in a stock car. Whenever the bus comes to a sudden halt, they have to plant their feet and brace themselves.

The people who have seats are relaxed. They don't have to be on guard about anything. They can even take naps since their stops are so far away. There's no need for them to pay attention, so they either doze off, stare ahead absently, or daydream.

However, for those who have to stand and hang on to whatever they can reach, the ride is difficult and they have to pay careful attention the whole time. If they let go of their grip or lose their footing, they're in trouble. They have to hold on tightly and brace themselves very carefully in order not to go flying as the bus careens around the bends.

Consider both groups at the end of their commutes. Those who were able to sit likely enjoyed the ride and got off feeling relaxed and may have even been in a peaceful state of mind. But because they were either dozing, gazing absentmindedly, or daydreaming, their minds were completely inattentive. They weren't recollecting the Buddha or doing any sort of kusala. All that can be said is they enjoyed being able to relax. As for those who were standing and holding on, although they became weary from the rough ride, they weren't neglectful for even a moment. They got to recollect the Buddha and the Dhamma for the duration of the ride and perform a lot of kusala.

To draw a comparison, devas are like the commuters who have seats. The stop where they'll get off is still far away. Getting lost in the vast deva sense pleasures, they ride along, daydreaming, dozing off, and even forgetting to eat and drink. They're doing quite well and



are completely comfortable with their seats. We humans, though, are like the commuters who have to hold on tightly, dangling along in the bouncing stock car. Nothing can be held on to for very long though; it's all too easily lost. As a result, there is an enormous amount of pressure intruding on us, and that's why we generally don't lose our sati.

Just like the passengers who recollect the Buddha and the Dhamma whenever the bus lurches, we do the same whenever our day doesn't go smoothly. When we get up in the morning, we reflect, "Another day has passed and death hasn't come yet. Kusala is a luxury of human life and mustn't be forgotten. The day must start with kusala! The Buddha shrine is at a prominent spot in the house because it's a way to always get in touch with kusala." And then we go to the Buddha shrine.

When we reach the Buddha image, we envision it actually being the Buddha right there in front of us, then we begin our offering with water, flowers, and candles. We truly devote ourselves to the attributes of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha and draw upon their power as we take refuge in the Triple Gem. After we vow to keep the precepts, we develop samādhi with the Buddha and Dhamma as our objects of meditation, and we develop wisdom of the *khandhas* by practicing *vipassanā*. We make various kinds of kusala this way, just being in front of the Buddha shrine. After we have centered ourselves in the Dhamma like this, we should make a great effort to maintain sati and make *dāna*, sila, samādhi, and vipassanā relevant to everything we do in our homes and everything we do with and for our bodies. When we gather momentum from in front of the Buddha image, we gain strength.

We need to treat each precious day as if it were going to be our last so that we can gain the benefits of the dispensation of the Buddha. If we are of the ordinary mindset that supposes that death is always far away, then we won't achieve the full advantage of being alive in the time of this dispensation. A human life is very short. What's more, we borrow this body. We can use it for any purpose we'd like provided we feed it everyday. This exchange is really only good for us if we value each day as precious as we value life overall, which will lead us to use the body wisely. That's why before we fall asleep each night we should reflect to see if we did a good deal of kusala that day. We can only say it was worth giving the body its meals that day if we performed a sufficient amount of kusala. The outcome of a day can only be measured in terms of kusala. If we want to get benefits over the weeks, months, and years ahead throughout life, then we need to be victorious one day after another.

## **Not to be well, but to be useful.**

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Our material needs and occupations are not for the sake of reveling in comfort. Rather, they can be seen as things that allow our bodies to continue to be used, just as engine oil and gasoline keep our cars running. The pārami are of the utmost importance in regards to a human life. The purpose of our food, clothing, shelter, financial gain, work, and the things we do for the body, is to be able to have a life that is long and healthy, well developed with wisdom, and full of strength, so that we may draw pure kusala out from it. Everything we do should be done as a means for performing kusala.

In most cases, puthujjana devas get very little kusala because they are so entranced by their circumstances. Humans, on the other hand, generally gain a lot of kusala because we are not in such a state of ease and bliss. All of our tasks, along with all of our senses, should be secured within the bounds of sati. Sati is like a piece of luggage that won't run out of capacity. We can put whatever we want in it and as much as we want. It can hold everything. We can put aging, sickness, and suffering, as well as all the necessary tasks related to obtaining food, clothing, and shelter within the boundaries of sati. Everything that is watched over by sati becomes part of the practice. The good, the bad, anything and everything becomes useful.

The only way we will have peace of mind is if we strive in the practice during our prime, when we have relatively good health and the body can be used in the most optimal way. If we wait until we're old and sick to practice, we may not even be able to get started. We can always achieve victory through kusala. Victory through other means isn't assured because anything other than kusala is like a fleeting visitor. We depend on our bodies, our possessions, and our families like a ladder that we must climb to arrive at the final goal. We must be able to plant our victory flags with dāna, sīla, samādhi, and vipassanā at the summit of the mountain of Dhamma. Only then will we fulfill the purpose of this life. We must be searching everyday to catch a glimpse of kusala so we can keep advancing toward the goal.

We constantly need wisdom that stems from sati to be able to use the body before it's too late. Wisdom will only arise with sati. The most important thing with respect to the body is sati. No matter how healthy or strong the various parts of our bodies may be, if we

lose sati, they will be rendered useless because our connection to Dhamma will have been broken. The body, faulty and ineffective, then does what it wants. But as long as we still have sati, then our connection to Dhamma isn't broken and the body can still be used wisely. If we are able to use it, we can still advance toward liberation.

We can remain determined and keep our lives aligned with Dhamma by summarizing the path into four points: dāna, sila, samādhi, and vipassanā. Sati is required to keep all of our reality linked to these four points. So everyday when we get up from bed we must strive to be mindful when we go in front of the Buddha image. And in order to have the strength to get through whatever hardships we face, we have to start from these four aspects of the practice. Every day, we must pave the way with sati and wisdom. When we are performing our daily tasks, we should try as much as possible to fit them inside the boundaries of these four points. We need to practice ardently to be able to pave the way.

The kilesā steal our time by keeping us from performing kusala, but we can safeguard ourselves from this by maintaining sati. If we apply sati, we can develop sila, samādhi, and vipassanā in the time required to take a step or eat a mouthful of food. Sila and samādhi will appear simultaneously when sati, the foundation of vipassanā, is present. As strong as our practice of sati is, that's how much we will increase the possibility of performing kusala. With aging and illness advancing, and death coming nearer, we can't wait for free time to materialize by chance. It won't appear on its own.

The purpose of maintaining sati continuously is so we can find opportunities to develop kusala that we otherwise wouldn't be aware of, even amidst the busiest times of the day. Being able to uncover even one minute of time like this to perform kusala is no trivial thing. If we're able to gain five minutes, that would be very significant; more than five minutes would be all the better. These little extra opportunities for doing kusala throughout the day will naturally open up to us because searching for kusala becomes a habit if we're already keeping a regular, structured practice of performing kusala, e.g., beginning each day with merit-making activities. We will also begin to routinely make merit while doing all of the necessary tasks that are required for the care of our body. In addition, our minds, which can be quite a mess, will be purified and made tranquil, and our views will become clearer.

Everyday, with the help of sati, we should keep these four points of dāna, sila, samādhi, and vipassanā at the forefront of our minds. But because they are not usually on our minds as we're going throughout the day, this will require strong sati. Therefore, we must be very deliberate with our efforts and intentions when it comes to this. If our objective is to attain liberation, we will surely be able to plant these four victory flags on the summit of Dhamma. We must check to see if we are lacking in these four points before bedtime, and

must not go to sleep unless they are all present. As each day passes, these four points, or victory flags, will be the only things that remain with certainty. Everything else will be blown away by the winds of anicca and vanish.

When a day passes by, those twenty-four hours are gone. If we didn't achieve anything by means of dāna, sīla, samādhi, or vipassanā to give value to this passage of time, what a great loss it will be! Everything undergoes a day's worth of wear and tear. Everything gets weaker by the day because everything suffers the forces of anicca in that time. The death that we are approaching is one day nearer. There's no way to turn back. As each day of this lifetime passes, some amount of our resources and material possessions inescapably gets older, used up, or worn out. The four points and the four victory flags will remain, though; they will firmly endure. We can only be considered skillful at living if we know how to intelligently use the body and our possessions so that we get profits that are longer lasting.

## If asked how you're doing, respond with Dhamma.

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If someone asks how we are doing, we should quickly connect with some type of kusala before responding. For example, we can bring to mind the attributes of the Triple Gem, we can radiate *mettā*, we can do vipassanā meditation or we can recall an instance of dāna, sīla, or *bhāvanā* that we've done in the past and concentrate on that. We should not reply, "Things are good," or, "I'm well," until we have linked our hearts with kusala.

If we maintain sati while we are going out or meeting up with people, or if we think thoughts of goodwill from the moment we set to go out, then as soon as we meet with someone, we are able to immediately respond, "I'm doing well," because we will already have kusala as our center. We must find the fundamental goodness that is kusala in order to be somewhat comfortable in this human life.

It's as if kusala is our base—our seat cushion and our bed. If we attempted to live without kusala, our kilesā would torture us. Life would be extremely miserable. Regardless of how much money we may have or what material possessions we may own, if we disconnect ourselves from kusala, there can only be distress. Once Dhamma is absent in us, our base becomes ignoble.

Our lives will be peaceful if we make dāna our base and develop generosity every day, from the very distinct acts of dāna—such as offering water, flowers, and candles to the Buddha image—to the less obvious forms—like cooking meals for our families, working, and paying the bus or taxi fare. Even the act of feeding animals out of goodwill and compassion, for no reason other than not wanting them to go hungry, can be a good way to be charitable as we go about the day. Nothing is too difficult for those who are skilled at dāna. If we genuinely take the Triple Gem as our refuge and observe the precepts with wisdom and faith, an enormous strength becomes available to us that can provide us with a feeling of serenity and security, both now and in the future.

When we connect to the power of samādhi that results from nurturing right concentration and generating genuine goodwill and the power that results from doing true vipassanā meditation, we will be very peaceful. A human's luxury is the serenity of Dhamma. It is only through this strength of Dhamma that we can be free and clear of the

stress and suffering we'd like to avoid. And it's also only by making an effort through Dhamma that we can enjoy the goodness that we want as we progress toward liberation.

Human life is only made steadier by living with the power of kusala, particularly the capacity we gain through cultivating samādhi and vipassanā, which can successfully remove worry and sorrow and bring peace in their place. When we say, "I'm doing well," it's possible that really could be the case. We can say we are doing well if we don't burn up with anxiety and sorrow when we meet face to face with things that generally would bring us to such a state. When the state of things for us is good, then we naturally don't have any worries, and, to the extent that we aren't worrying, that's how well we are doing.

We will surely be well if our minds don't become afflicted when meeting with troubling circumstances, don't become distressed when meeting with miserable circumstances, don't become uncontrolled when meeting with chaotic circumstances, and don't become discontented when meeting with disappointing circumstances. If we can live with the foundation of Dhamma in a way that allows us to maintain our peace and steadiness in this world where anxiety and stress abound, then we'll be able to say we are doing well.

## It takes three births to become human.

(*kamma – discernment – persistence*)

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The Pāli word *dvija* means “bird.” It can also mean “twice-born,” because a bird requires two births. Its first birth is from its mother’s body, while it is just an egg. But the egg still needs protection and warmth from the mother’s brooding for quite some time. In due course, a little chick emerges from the egg. With this second birth, however, all it has is just the appearance of a bird; it can’t yet exhibit the abilities of a bird. Its plumage hasn’t yet developed, and its legs are still weak. It’s not able to fly, move about, or eat on its own.

Until it becomes a fledgling, its parents will protect it and look after it. Once it is able to fly, eat, and live more or less independently, its parents will still need to teach it to be *skillful* at flying, eating, and living. It’s only in this way that it will acquire its full abilities. We can say that by its parents bringing it up like this, they are giving it yet another birth, so it only becomes a bird that is fully complete with its abilities after its third birth.

Similarly, we can only become genuine humans after our third birth.

1. The day that birth comes from the mother’s womb can be called the *kamma* birthday. The *kamma* of mother and of child converge, as it’s the day that they meet. The baby cannot be considered a complete human just with the occurrence of the *kamma* birthday, though. To put it into terms of the bird’s growth, the baby is still just barely past what would be the egg stage. Although the *kamma* that brought birth from the womb, together with the care and support of the parents, is enough to call this form a human being, to be considered a genuine human, the next thing that is needed is discernment, which can activate the *kamma* that is still just in potential form. The *kamma* from past *kusala* led to this stage of human development, but it is not enough.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a man named Mahādhana and his wife. As a result of their past *kamma*, they were very rich. But their *kammic* potential was also such that, had they practiced the Dhamma with urgency, he could have become an *arahant* and she could have become an *anāgāmi*. As for the worldly side of things, their *kammic* potential was such that they could have become among the absolute wealthiest of people if



they would have made the required effort. These kammic potentials would only have come to fruition had they activated them with their discernment and persistence.

Their parents were very rich but had little foresight. They didn't give their children the opportunity to be properly educated. Neither Mahādhana nor his wife had any siblings. Mahādhana's parents told him, "Son, you're our only child and we have more than enough wealth—so much so, that even if you went your entire life without working, it couldn't possibly be used up. You don't need to pursue an education, as an education is just used to acquire material wealth; nor do you need to listen to Dhamma teachings." And so they didn't arrange for his education. Perhaps they didn't want to be apart from him while he went away to study, or maybe they believed they could count on material wealth alone to provide a strong foundation in life.

Mahādhana's wife's parents were of a similar mind. The only notable thing about Mahādhana and his wife was that they had the good kamma to be born into wealth. Unfortunately, they didn't have any special skills or capabilities. When they were old enough, their parents arranged their marriage. If we look at this from a worldly sense, we see a rich son and a rich daughter. If we look at it from the point of view of Dhamma, it's a marriage of two blind people. Though Mahādhana and his wife were rather incapable, they were able to get along okay with the help of their parents while they were alive.

When their parents passed away, however, everyone knew they were vulnerable. People began lying to them and cheating them. Because they had little discernment, they didn't realize when they were being taken advantage of. They lost a lot of wealth because of this. What's worse, because Mahādhana associated with drunkards, he became one himself. If he'd had any discernment, he would have had the sense not to associate with them. The wealth that was supposed to last a lifetime was squandered away because he and his friends continually drank and misspent it. Soon, the homes that had been handed down to them by their parents had to be traded for money, at which point everything had been lost.

As a consequence of not being educated and lacking discernment, they were left with nothing when they were only around twenty years old and ultimately ended up as beggars. Remember, they had the potential to become noble ones or to at least become extraordinarily wealthy, but they did neither. After only having a kamma birth, they thought that they were fully accomplished human beings, but it was too early to come to that conclusion. The extent to which good kamma from the past bears its fruits for us to enjoy now depends on how effective we are at using our discernment and effort.

2. When a child is old enough to begin their education, they must start their path to discernment. Everything is destroyed at the end of life when the three thieves of aging, illness, and death make their attack, so whatever knowledge was gained in a previous life is

no longer available. There's the saying, "Wisdom is a pot of gold that can't be stolen." In fact, this wisdom is only safe from exterior thieves. When the three thieves that lie within attack, we can't avoid them. We'll have to start again from scratch in the next life. If we have only reached the stage of having knowledge about the Dhamma but haven't actually started practicing it, it will all be taken away by these bandits at the end of life. Of course, this doesn't make knowledge worthless. Although it will be snatched away in the end, we still must learn because we need discernment to know what is skillful and unskillful.

When we acquire knowledge from a teacher, we can say it's like the teacher is pregnant with wisdom. When we investigate and explore the instruction they give, discernment is born and we gain the benefit of their mettā. "Discernment" here means the knowledge gained from studying that leads to becoming skilled at doing things, not the experiential wisdom that is won through actually practicing. We can call the day that we've developed enough discernment to be sufficiently skilled the discernment birthday. Simply put, it is gaining the discernment needed to know how to act in order to influence our past kamma to mature, so we can benefit from its fruits. But just being a person who has achieved this second birth of discernment is still not good enough.

3. Even after having the discernment birthday, we've still only reached the halfway point of becoming fully realized human beings. This is true even if we have obtained degrees or specialized skills. If we try to go up against dukkha and kilesā, the two adversaries that arrive with us on our kamma birthday, by only using the discernment that we have gained through studying, we will be defeated and will have to surrender to them. The potential power that we are capable of gaining as humans will be sufficient only when we are strong enough to dare to challenge these two foes. Only then will we be genuine human beings.

That's why we have to continue to the third birthday of persistence. That's persistence toward the practice—a higher, more potent type of persistence that can accomplish right effort, not merely the type of effort that is used in relation to mundane activities. True persistence, the power that can subdue and overtake the kilesā that are the primary cause of all evil, must arise. In addition, the strength that can enable the body to perform kusala must emerge. Both the power that can subdue unwholesome mental, verbal, and bodily actions and the power that can add wholesome mental, verbal, and bodily actions are needed.

When we learn the Dhamma from a teacher, the outcome must be to actually put the teachings into practice, even if we've only studied under them for a short time. The persistence birthday occurs when we can really practice in line with what they've taught, and their teaching becomes a refuge. When persistence becomes strong enough to subdue

the unwholesome and increase the wholesome, it becomes the type of powerful persistence that is aligned with Dhamma. If we achieve these two aims through dāna, sīla, and bhāvanā, it can be said that we are practicing true Dhamma and we have reached the persistence birthday. We'll have the strength to be able to go up against dukkha and the kilesā. We will become genuine humans only if we are getting along great in life with our practice in the midst of the good and the bad. Out of these three kinds of humankind, a human born of kamma is one who cries, a human born of discernment is one who grumbles, and a human born of persistence is one who is steadfast, neither crying nor grumbling. We aren't doing very well until we reach the persistence birthday.

Past kamma is foundational kamma for this current life. The discernment that points to the path and the persistence that leads to actual practice are new kamma. New kamma can be created because of strength that is based upon old kamma; the potential of old kamma can be brought to fruition with new kamma. We'll have to have a persistence birthday every day. If we can constantly maintain persistence linked to sati, we will be well all the time, and when someone asks how we're doing, we'll be able to answer, "I'm well." Even if we aren't well physically, we will be able to make our minds well.

To make clear how kamma, discernment, and persistence are connected to new kamma: kamma is wanting to make an effort to be free from unwholesomeness and fully endowed with wholesomeness; discernment is making the choices that decide what actions we take; persistence is following through and carrying out our choices. Sati helps the work of persistence. To be well, sati is in charge.

May you all be well by means of the Dhamma.

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## Glossary

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*Akusala*: Bad action, demerit; unskillful, unwholesome.

*Anāgāmi*: “Non-returner”, one who has attained the third level of awakening.

*Anattā*: Not-self.

*Anicca*: Impermanent, inconstant.

*Arahant*: “Worthy one”, one who has attained complete awakening.

*Asubha*: Unpleasant, ugly.

*Attā*: Self.

*Bhāvanā*: Developing the mind by means of thought or meditation.

*Bodhisatta*: A being destined to Buddhahood, a Buddha-to-be.

*Dāna*: Giving, generosity.

*Deva*: A being who resides in the celestial realms.

*Dukkha*: Stress, discomfort, suffering—brought on by birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair; association with the unloved; separation from the loved; and not getting what is wanted. In brief, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha. [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56:11].

*Kamma*: Intention—expressed through physical action, speech, or thought. [Nibbedhika Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya 6:63].

*Khandhas*: Aggregates, which condition the appearance of life in any form. There are five: rūpa (physical form); vedanā (three modes of feeling—pleasure, pain, or indifferent); saññā (perception); saṅkhāra (thought construct), and viññāṇa (consciousness).

*Kilesā*: Defilements, impurities of mind: lobha (greed), dosa (anger), moha (delusion), māna (conceit), ditthi (wrong view), vicikicchā (doubt), thīna (mental torpor), uddhacca

(distraction), *ahirika* (shamelessness), and *anottappa* (lack of compunction). [Vibhaṅga XII].

*Kusala*: Virtue, good action, merit; skillful, wholesome.

*Mettā*: Goodwill, benevolence.

*Nicca*: Permanent, constant.

*Paññā*: Wisdom.

*Pāramī*: Qualities to be developed that support the path to awakening: *Dāna* (generosity), *Sīla* (virtue), *Nekkhamma* (renunciation of sensuality, and of the household life for monastics), *Paññā* (wisdom), *Viriya* (persistence), *Khanti* (patience, forbearance), *Sacca* (truthfulness), *Adhiṭṭhāna* (determination), *Mettā* (goodwill), *Upekkhā* (equanimity).

*Puthujjana*: One who hasn't yet attained one of the four levels of awakening (*sotāpanna*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi*, and *arahant*).

*Sakadāgāmi*: "Once-returner", one who has attained the second level of awakening.

*Samādhi*: Concentration.

*Saṃsāra*: Transmigration, wandering through the cycle of rebirth and death.

*Samvega*: A feeling of shock and dismay over the predicament of *saṃsāra*, and a sense of urgency to find an escape.

*Saṅgha*: Refers to the communities of monastics generally, or the followers of the Buddha who have attained at least the first level of awakening.

*Sāsana*: The study and practice of the Buddha's teaching.

*Sati*: Memory, mindfulness.

*Sīla*: Virtue; moral practice.

*Sotāpanna*: "Stream-winner", one who has attained the first level of awakening.

*Sukha*: Ease, pleasure, happiness, bliss.

*Vipassanā*: Insight.

## Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

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Yaw Sayadaw (Ashin Sirindabhivamsa) was born in Letpan Village, Gangaw Township, Magwe Division, Myanmar on March 26, 1943 (the 6th Waning day of the month of TaBaung, in Myanmar Era 1304) to parents U Ye Naing and Daw Toke Khaing. He became a novice at age fourteen and again at age eighteen, and was fully ordained at the age of twenty with the name Ashin Sirinda. He went on to continue his studies of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, its commentaries, and subcommentaries in Mandalay and Yangon. Sayadaw's decades' worth of extensive study of the Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Piṭakas at the highest levels culminated in him being awarded the title of Tipiṭakadhara Tipiṭakakawida, or, "One who knows the Tipiṭaka by heart." Sayadaw is currently the abbot of Mahavisuddharama TaikThit Monastery in Yangon, and oversees several other monasteries in Myanmar.